

“200 Years of Stewardship: True Greatness”
Mark 10:35-45

The story is told about Albert Einstein being invited to speak at a banquet held in his honor at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Hundreds of people from all over the country crowded an auditorium to hear what he had to say. When it came time for him to speak, the greatest physicist walked to the lectern, solemnly looked around, and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am very sorry, but I have nothing to say.” Then he sat down. The audience was in shock. A few seconds later, Einstein got up, walked back to the podium, and spoke again. “In case I have something to say, I will come back and say it.” Six months later he wired the president of the college with the message: “Now I have something to say.” Another dinner was held, and Einstein made his speech.

Imagine having that kind of strength in you. Einstein was one of the greatest minds of his time and pretty much any time, but evidently he also possessed an inner strength that did not make him have to bow down to the expectations and pressures of the people around him. I recently heard a mother say that she recently discovered that parents are often “duped” into thinking that they have to enroll their children in every possible activity in order for them to live to their full potential. When it came to her second child, she had learned the lesson and stopped the craziness and limited after school activities to one or two things. These kinds of counter-cultural values are not easy to live, especially today because of all the media hype and our access to information. But at the heart of living by these counter-cultural values is the heart of our faith, the kingdom of God.

In today’s story two of the disciples were striving for power as they knew it. Right after Jesus had told them three times that he was going to be executed, they still asked for power that is corrupt and controlling, ego power. We are puzzled by their reactions. How could they be so insensitive to what Jesus was saying to them so clearly? If they were seeking to have special positions of leadership after Jesus was gone, then that is really disdainful. But even if they really got what Jesus was saying and were still trying to control things, then we also see them reacting out of their need for security. Or maybe they thought that this was the only way to respond with faith. But no matter what their motivation might have been, what James and John needed to be reminded of by Jesus was that greatness does not come from ego power. Rather true greatness comes from a heart of service and letting go of earthly power, even to the point of death. This was so radical at the time of Jesus because power as the disciples knew it was always about taking and getting. Their society was class-based in which an urban ruling elite of no more than 2% of the population held all the power, wealth, and status. There was also a small class of officials who were to be found in the military, the upper levels of the priesthood, in senior government positions, and as high-ranking servants and scribes. But the majority, as many as 90% of the population, were a rural-based peasant class of agricultural workers, fishers, and artisans. Economic exploitation meant that two-thirds of the annual production of wealth ended up in the hands of the ruling elite through taxation on agricultural production and ownership of land. The peasants lived an existence of unremitting labor, borderline nourishment, high infant mortality, and radically lower life expectancy.

In a book entitled, *Jesus: A New Vision*, Marcus Borg talks about this kind of letting go of earthly power as “a dying of the self as the center of its own concern...a dying to the world as the center of security and identity. [This self and this world] are the two great rival centers to centering in God, and the path of transformation thus involves a dying to both of them.”

True greatness is not about some kind of false humility or about being powerless and allowing others to abuse us. In order to be able to truly serve in Jesus’ way, we have to access our soul

power. In the kingdom of God there is no room for ego power. Ego power is the power that seeks to impress, exploit or manipulate others. Soul power seeks to serve, empower and embrace. In his book, *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore writes, "When we want to accomplish something egoistically, we gather our strength, develop a strategy, and apply every effort...The power of the soul, in contrast, is more like a great reservoir or, in traditional imagery, like the force of water in a fast-rushing river. It is natural, not manipulated, and stems from an unknown source...What is the source of this soul power?...It comes first of all from living close to the heart, and not at odds with it...soul power may emerge from failure, depression, and loss."

Soul power is about being in touch with God as we make decisions, react to people and go about every moment of our days. This kind of power leads us to recognize how valuable we are without becoming arrogant. And it always leads us to service. Here is an illustration. A well-dressed European woman was on safari in Africa. The group stopped briefly at a hospital for lepers. The heat was intense, the flies buzzing. She noticed a nurse bending down in the dirt, tending to the (terrible) sores of a leper. With disdain the woman remarked, "Why, I wouldn't do that for all the money in the world!" The nurse quietly replied, "Neither would I."

Jesus himself knew this kind of power. He was not weak. In fact, what he did in his life could have only come from a tremendous connection with soul power. Because of his soul power, he was able to not succumb to the pressures and temptations of messianic powers to try to become the king of Israel. He was able to be in solidarity with those who were rejected by the power systems of society: the women, the lepers, the foreigners, and the peasants. Even though this kind of exercise of soul power led him to the cross, ultimately it accomplished his mission in such ways that truly changed the world. If Jesus played by the rules of the power systems of his world, he would have not become a traveling preacher. He would have sought to climb the ladder of success in the synagogue, instead of seeking to change the world.

How does the example of Jesus inspire us to access our own soul power? In his book, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, Harvey Cox writes, "We become ethical only when we ask ourselves the question: What kind of person do I want to be? That's a very different question from 'What do I believe?' And yet this seems to be what has preoccupied the church in every age. But to ask 'What kind of person do I want to be?' requires the capacity to put oneself in situations one has never experienced, to see and especially to feel a moral question from the viewpoint of people of a different class or race or gender or age."

What kind of person do you want to be? Do you want to be a person of ego power or do you want to be a person of soul power? Who are the people that you think of as great? What makes them great in your eyes? What are their qualities? Are they the same qualities that Jesus talked about for greatness?

I believe that in order to access our soul power we have to be willing to put ourselves in those experiences that lead us to exploring our souls. These are the experiences of prayer and service. Prayer is an inward path where we learn to let go of our self-importance in order to be able to learn to be fully present to God in every moment of our lives. The outward side of prayer is service. Looking at our life's work and what we do to serve others can be a tremendous source of our connection to soul power. The cup and baptism that Jesus was inviting the disciples to receive were symbols of dying to one's preferences and wants. It was an invitation to put God at the center of their lives and nothing else. So, the invitation is the same for us. We are called to live lives of service to others. This is not about counting how many volunteer hours you put in every week because service in and of itself can also become a source of glorying ourselves and our egos or manipulating others or letting others manipulate us. It is about the spirit of service within your heart. It is about approaching all of life as a service to God. It is in

the way you greet people on the street and the way you do your work. It is in the way you take care of yourself and in the way you open up to the suffering and needs of others. In your bulletin today there is an invitation to serve as officers of the church. This is a specific way we invite you to use your time and talents to serve in the church. I hope that you will take this call seriously, but most importantly I hope that today you will look at your stewardship of time. What does it say about the kind of person you would like to be? Do you live your days fulfilling the kind of person you would like to be? You don't have to be great by the standards of the world in order to be of great service to the world. You don't have to be fully qualified for every job that you undertake. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve." You don't even have to have it together before you serve others. Henri Nouwen in his book *The Wounded Healer* wrote that "The healer is not a person in perfect health, but a sick person as well. The difference is that the healer would bind up his own wounds long enough to minister to others. That's all any of us can do in the church because we are all wounded healers."

I recently heard about a boy who is only 11 years old and who is making a tremendous difference in the world. It all started during Hurricane Charley in 2004. Zach Bonner, then just 6 years old, took his little red wagon door to door in his neighborhood to collect clean water for the victims. After four months, Zach had collected 27 truckloads of supplies. "Some boys like football or baseball, Zach likes doing charity work," his mom says. He liked it so much by the time hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit, Zach's family needed to set up a foundation because of the amount of monetary donations he was taking in. They named it the Little Red Wagon Foundation. Zach's latest mission doesn't include the wagon, just his feet, and a 1,225-mile journey of the "My House to the White House" project. This is the last walk he is doing to raise money and awareness for the 1.3 million homeless kids in the United States. The money is going to setting up apartments for them. Zach, who is now 11, says, "It's really hard not to help. Once you've met them and heard their stories, it's hard not to want to help."

May you always connect with the spirit of Christ that is within to live lives of true greatness and love. Amen.